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THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AS STRATEGIC ALLIES

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This report is a narrative analysis of public statements by Russian and Chinese officials regarding the 2018 and 2019 Sino-Russian summits.

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INTRODUCTION

China's foreign relations are known for their reliance on the 'friendship' narrative,¹ and its relations with Russia have been no exception. Still, the Sino-Russian ties lay beyond what could be considered diplomacy-as-usual from the Chinese perspective.

Official documents make reference to "the tradition of friendship between the peoples of Russia and China, passed down from generation to generation".² The history of interactions, however, suggests otherwise, as both nations were effectively cut off from each other from late 1950 and until 1989, and mutual enmity peaked during the 1969 border conflict on the Ussuri river.

Since the official normalisation of relations between Moscow and Beijing during the meeting of Mikhail Gorbachev and

Deng Xiaoping in 1989—shortly before the collapse of the USSR—Russia and China have succeeded in establishing a stable political dialogue and in finding commonalities between their regional and global agendas. Today, Russia is one of the prime foci of Chinese foreign policy, along with the United States and Europe, according to Xi Jinping.³ The People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation are strategic partners that base their relationship on the pragmatic convergence of certain interests, but are still foreign and distant from each other.

The Sino-Russian ties can be characterised as:

1. Historical—exchanges dating back to the 13th century and formally established in the Nerchinsk Treaty of 1689;



2. Comprehensive—covering issues across the board, from everyday exchanges between neighbouring countries to shaping the Eurasian space of the future, stretching across multiple local, bilateral, multilateral, and international fora;
3. Tactical—each perceives the other as counterbalancing the power of the West, albeit arguably to different extents;
4. Asymmetrical—China is increasingly the dominant partner with more leverage;
5. Evolving—as Russia is forced to accommodate China’s growing global role conceptualised in its “major country diplomacy” approach, and China needs to continue seeking engagement with Russia without aligning with Moscow’s worldview or signalling exclusivity.

With these points in mind, a difference in opinion persists as to whether China and Russia are actually becoming closer allies or not. Dmitri Trenin argues against it from the perspective of practical implementation: “The two vast bureaucracies which run this pair of countries [Russia and China] are still, culturally, worlds apart. Often, signals coming from above find it hard to reach the operational levels and motivate closer cooperation.”⁴ Whereas Michael E. O’Hanlon and Adam Twardowski invoke strategic considerations to argue increasing proximity: “[...] realpolitik considerations are



THIS REPORT PROVIDES A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC STATEMENTS BY RUSSIAN AND CHINESE OFFICIALS

- By looking at official exchanges during meetings between the two heads of state we analyse the narratives shaping Sino-Russian cooperation and their dissemination in the state-controlled media. We analysed statements made regarding the 2018 and 2019 Sino-Russian summits.
- Messages voiced by leaders provide a framework for diplomats and motivate internal support for the next round of international policies.
- Official narratives matter, especially in authoritarian states, as messages of friendship/hostility expressed by authoritarian leaders are directly linked to official policy and tend to have a wide and immediate impact on all levels of interactions.





Hangzhou, China - June 3 2020: Leaders of the BRICS.

driving them [Russia and China] together. [...] It seems likely that Russia and China will continue to find ways to leverage their combined military and economic clout across Africa”, but also point to the role the US plays in relations between the two countries.⁵ Also, opinions vary on the extent of overlap between official narratives of cooperation on both sides, and the extent to which this narrative is disseminated domestically and projected internationally. In other words, does China speak of Russia’s importance officially, during Summits, in the same way as it communicates domestically, after the Summits? Are messages to international and domestic audiences the same?

By looking at official exchanges during meetings between the two heads of state we can analyse the narratives shaping Sino-Russian cooperation and their dissemination in the state-controlled media; messages voiced by leaders provide a framework for diplomats and motivate internal support for the next round of international policies. Official narratives matter, especially in authoritarian states, as messages of friendship/hostility expressed by authoritarian leaders are directly linked to official policy and tend to have a wide and immediate impact on all levels of interactions, as exemplified by the Russia-Turkey standoff of 2015 and the normalisation of the relationship that followed in 2017.



METHODOLOGY

In order to work with the most current available data on China's official public narratives about Russia and Russia's about China, we have chosen the two most recent China-Russia summits for narrative analysis, namely:

- 8–10 June 2018, Summit between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in China
- 5 June 2019, Summit between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in Russia

To avoid presenting outdated information, we have focused our analysis on the most recent

Summit, using the 2018 Summit for purposes of comparison.

Two types of information channels are analysed in this paper—the information available on Chinese and Russian official government websites, and the news releases published by the main national press agencies and media outlets. These were selected because they were deemed valid channels for what these two governments wanted to communicate officially about their relations.

The analysed channels in China include:

- The Central Government of the People's Republic of China: www.gov.cn
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China: www.fmprc.gov.cn
- China Military Commission Online [中国军网]: <http://www.81.cn>
- *People's Daily Online* [人民日报]: <http://www.people.com.cn>
- *Xinhua News Agency* [新华网]: <http://www.news.cn>
- The China Internet Information Center (under the State Council Information Office): china.com.cn
- *China Daily Global Edition*: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn>
- *Global Times*: <http://www.globaltimes.cn>
- *CGTN*: <https://news.cgtn.com>

The analysed channels in Russia include:

- President of Russia: <http://kremlin.ru>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <http://mid.ru>
- Ministry of Defence of Russia: <http://mil.ru>
- *Novaya Gazeta*: <http://www.ng.ru>
- *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*: <https://rg.ru>
- *RIA Novosti*: <https://ria.ru>
- *ITAR-TASS*: <https://tass.com>
- *INTERFAX*: <https://www.interfax.ru>
- *Russia Today*: <https://www.rt.com>





SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1

Narrative analysis demonstrates efforts on the part of both China and Russia to portray closer ties between them.

Nevertheless, Russia experts believe that the peak of the relationship has already passed, because China poses a certain threat to Russia. First, the relationship is unbalanced, and not in Russia's favour. Second, China will use its newfound assertiveness not just on its adversaries, but also on its partners, including Russia.

2

Both sides have identified the lack of trust and the emotional distance between the countries to be a serious obstacle in deepening economic, local cross-border, and people-to-people ties.

Russians tend to see China as a predatory and low-value-added economic partner, interested solely in its natural resources and land. The Chinese public tends to view Russia as insignificant, disrespectful towards the sovereignty of other countries, and declining in influence, therefore, not suitable as a main global partner. To counter such perceptions, both partners are consciously shaping their domestic narratives to emphasise emotional kinship and historic bonds through official channels and state-controlled media.

3

Narratives aimed at Russian domestic audiences praise China is a high value-added partner, stress that mutual complementarity exists between Chinese technological development and Russian exceptional human capital and tradition.

Space exploration as an area of cooperation is not emphasised by chance, as it is a particularly emotional and national pride-invoking sector in Russia. The Russian public feels that Russia should be in control in this aspect of cooperation, with China as the junior partner, and therefore not a threat to Russia.

4

Narratives aimed at Chinese domestic audiences portray Russia as a close neighbour, which is treating China with growing respect and admiration; it supports their political system and culture, and is beneficial for growth.

The emotional aspect of the Chinese public wanting to be admired and respected, stemming from the 'Century of Humiliation', is exploited in this case. Using key phrases taken from Xi Jinping's official political communications, such as 'community of shared destiny', stories about Russia are specially disseminated through the Chinese media to demonstrate that Russia has respect for the 'Chinese way' and is no longer the ideological provider as it was after World War II up until the Sino-Soviet split.

5

The narrative of the 'US government turning its back on multilateralism' is ever-present in statements and publications on Sino-Russian cooperation on both sides, in outlets for domestic and external consumption alike, demonstrating the awareness of both governments that opposition to the US is a significant and common interest.

6

The narrative of 'the bear and the dragon uniting to contain NATO' exists in the Russian media space, but not in the Chinese one.

Today, Russia is more interested in closer security cooperation with China than vice-versa. NATO is higher on the Russian agenda than on the Chinese agenda, which prefers to attribute its grievances more narrowly—directing them towards the current US administration and not towards NATO as a whole. However, given the growing acknowledgement of the rise of China as a challenge for NATO, this situation may change in the future, with China moving towards stronger anti-NATO rhetoric.

OFFICIAL AND MEDIA NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Using major summits to showcase country relations

Leveraging historical ties

The year 2019 was a symbolic year for Sino-Russian relations. During the June 2019 Summit, both presidents referred to the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries 70 years ago, and underscored the unprecedented level of relations, with Vladimir Putin stating “We noted that our cooperation has reached a very high level. It would be no exaggeration to say that this level is unprecedentedly high.”⁶ Xi Jinping used a more pragmatic wording, however, corroborating the message in principle and touching upon state interests: “At present, China-Russia relations are making steady headway at a high level, going through the best period in their development. Both sides strongly support each other and defend each other’s vital interests. Political and strategic mutual trust is growing.”⁷ Both countries are also celebrating 400 years of contact between Russia and China, seeking to legitimise their special friendship through the historical dimension.⁸

In the speech delivered during one of the side-events at the Summit—the 70th

anniversary commemoration event in Moscow—Xi Jinping recalled Soviet Russia’s political and developmental support during the early days of the People’s Republic of China, brushing over the Sino-Soviet split (from the late 1950s until 1989), and noted that both sides moved for normalisation according to the “trend of the times” and “the fundamental interests of the two peoples”, and presented the Chinese outlook on the newly upgraded status of Sino-Russian cooperation, namely: a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era” [“新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系”; “Отношения всеобъемлющего партнерства и стратегического взаимодействия, вступающих в новую эпоху”]. This name for the partnership is used exclusively in the context of Sino-Russian relations.

Adding the signature phrase ‘for a New Era’, which has been enshrined in the PRC Constitution as ‘Xi Jinping thought’, strongly signals the predominance of Chinese political discourse over the Russian, and points to the wider trend of Xi’s concepts entering the Russian domain, e.g. “a new type of international relations” and “a community of shared future for mankind”. These concepts are among the most used in China,⁹ and Chinese official English-



language media are popularising them for consumption abroad. Russia signing off on ‘the New Era’ narrative has been lauded in China, where this is perceived as Russia turning away from Western political discourse and embracing the ‘alternative’—the Chinese outlook. Russian support for these concepts—albeit only rhetorically at the moment—serves China’s goal of increasing its international legitimacy.

Highlighting the positive effect of a Sino-Russian partnership

Our analysis of press releases and reports by official news outlets on both sides suggest an effort to underscore the positive impact of the Sino-Russian partnership globally and its role as a global stabilising factor, thus warding off outside criticism that Sino-Russian rapprochement could be a challenge to the existing global order. TASS built a report around Putin’s quote “Russian-Chinese cooperation in the global arena contributes to global security”,¹⁰ whereas *Xinhua* emphasised “contributions to regional and world peace, stability and development” when reporting on the results of the 2019 Summit.¹¹

The Chinese media do not seem to shy away from signalling Sino-Russian convergence to the international readership, regardless of fears that a tightening partnership with Russia might work against China on the global stage; Russia is perceived as a disruptor of the current international system, whereas China is regarded as an assertive

newcomer fighting for a bigger role.¹² An opinion article, originally written for *Xinhua* but reposted across China’s major official English language platforms, including *China Daily* and *China.org.cn*, states: “The goal of such a new kind of partnership is for both sides to give more support to each other as they pursue their own development paths, preserve respective core interests, and protect sovereignty and territorial integrity. To build that partnership, the two sides have vowed to closely coordinate with each other in aligning their development strategies, expand mutually beneficial cooperation in trade and investment, and further expand overall bilateral ties.”¹³ Such statements project Beijing’s main goal for closer Sino-Russian relations—mutual support in safeguarding each other’s political systems. Trade serves as a support tool for this political goal.

Demonstrating the personal friendship between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping

On the representational level, around the time of the Summits, the Russian and Chinese media paid attention to exhibiting the affectionate and cordial relationship between Putin and Xi: “The Chinese president once described Putin as his ‘best friend’ and ‘confidant’, and Putin called Xi a ‘reliable partner and good friend’. And their tight-knit relationship is expected to lead the bilateral relationship to another highlight moment this June.”¹⁴

A CGTN video presented an image of Putin taking Xi on a cruise along the shores of the



Neva river in his native Saint Petersburg, sending the message that the two leaders are ‘best friends’—laid-back, relaxed, sitting next to each other on the boat and later engaging in free and unconstrained conversation.¹⁵ The same event is described in detail in Russian media, mentioning Xi’s story of the time when Putin performed a song about Saint Petersburg for him on the piano.¹⁶

In an article published on the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later quoted by *Russia Today*, the vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC Le Yucheng recounts other moments that demonstrate the closeness between Xi and Putin: “Over the past six years, the two leaders have met 30 times, five times a year on average. They have travelled on a high-speed train together, watched hockey, rode along the

Neva River, and prepared pancakes, which was widely discussed by the public.”¹⁷

Such active efforts at pursuing the personal friendship narrative around the time of the Summits is employed as a personification of the friendship between the nations. Internationally, the friendship shows that both sides take the strategic partnership seriously. But it also serves a purpose domestically, by creating a sense of stability and reliability among the populations.

Thematic narratives used to characterise Sino-Russian relations

Boosting economy and trade. Aware of the popular Russian image of China as a predatory economic partner, over which Russia has no leverage, both sides are putting great effort into countering these suspicions through official communications, amplified in domestic Russian media channels. China has made three commitments to Russia for improving public opinion:

1. more imports
2. hi-tech cooperation
3. on-spot processing, not just extraction of hydrocarbons

The quotes from Chinese leaders disseminated in press releases promise to double trade—from 108 to 200 billion USD—by 2024 and to import more Russian goods.¹⁸ The leaders also emphasise cooperation in state-of-the-art tech and science, including



Screenshot from RT.com: “Chinese MOD informed about the friendship of Putin and Jinping”





September, 2018 - Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai - Plenary session among the heads of five states: Russia, China, Japan, Mongolia and Korea. In the frame: Vladimir Putin, Xi Jin

space exploration, thus downplaying the role of raw materials in Russian exports, e.g. at a meeting between premiers Li Keqiang and Dmitry Medvedev in 2019.¹⁹ It is hard to challenge the perception of the Russian public that China needs Russian oil and gas, as energy makes up over 70% of Russian exports to China, therefore, a strategy of promising higher value-added deals in the energy sector is employed by the Chinese government. Li said: “[...] now we are promoting a comprehensive format of cooperation, which includes the field of processing. Not only exploration and sales, but also processing.”²⁰

Still, given the widespread estimation among Russians that China is exploiting Russian national natural resources and taking

advantage of poor oversight and corruption in Russia,²¹ these attempts at changing the narrative are unlikely to bring about changes in public opinion. Somewhat ironically, the most upvoted comment to the news report quoted above reads: “Haven’t [you] sold all of the forest to the Chinese yet?”²²

Closer military cooperation. According to the PRC Security Concept, China’s three principles of security cooperation are: non-alignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting any third country.²³ This approach is also upheld in Sino-Russian security cooperation, making any form of official military alliance very unlikely. Still, the official channels and news outlets in Russia, and to a lesser extent in China, produce a domestic narrative of a

” Both countries exercise similar approaches to creating an attractive national purpose narrative in opposition to the Western liberal model. The goal of creating such narratives is to increase domestic social solidarity, avoid extensive emigration (in Russia’s case), and limit the spread of liberal ideology domestically.

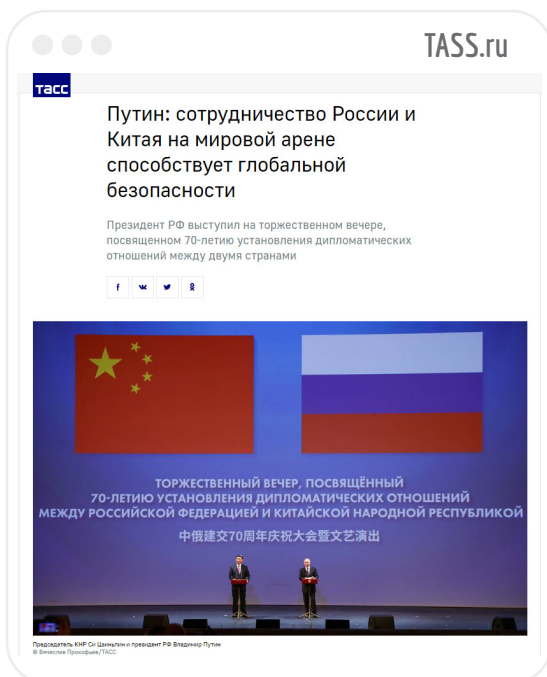
growing security partnership by reporting that China and Russia are on the path to closer military cooperation, and by quoting agreements: joint military exercises, and counterterrorism and anti-drug smuggling efforts. Especially significant in this regard is a quote from Putin at the Valdai Discussion Club about cooperation with China on an early-warning radar network: “I don’t know, I’m probably not going to tell you a big secret, it will become known anyway: We are now helping our Chinese partners to create an SPRN system—a missile attack warning system.”²⁴ This and other statements made by Putin, and the fact that Russia is “slowly and gradually starting to use the word [alliance] again”,²⁵ has been picked up by the Russian media, resulting in the conclusion expressed by Vasily Kashin on the Carnegie Moscow Center website and quoted in *Novye Izvestiya*: “By collaborating with China in the military field, Russia loses almost nothing from the security standpoint, yet complicates life for the United States.”²⁶

The motivations for disseminating the narrative of closer military cooperation are:

1. Russia is signalling internally that although NATO in general and the US in particular are trying to ‘surround’ it,²⁷ Russia now has a strong ally with the second biggest military budget in the world.²⁸
2. China demonstrates domestically that in Russia it has found a partner and a trustworthy supplier of weapons.

Showcasing an alternative to Western liberalism. Both countries exercise similar approaches to creating an attractive national purpose narrative in opposition to the Western liberal model.²⁹ The goal of creating such narratives is to increase domestic social solidarity, avoid extensive emigration (in Russia’s case), and limit the spread of liberal ideology domestically.





Screenshot from TASS.ru: “Putin: cooperation of Russia and China on a global scale helps global security”

The Communist Party of China has traditionally disagreed with Russia’s emphasis on religion as a solidifying factor within society and with the empowerment of religious institutions, namely, the Russian Orthodox Church and pro-Putin Muslim communities (to cater to the Muslim population). China’s strongly negative stance against religion, rooted in Socialist ideology, and the limited rights granted to followers of the Russian Orthodox faith have long been criticised in Russia: “Now in China, Orthodoxy has [been allowed] the status of ‘religion of the Russian national minority’. Rituals can be performed in places officially registered under religious activities at the invitation of the local religious community and with the approval of the

local branch of the State Administration for Religious Affairs of the PRC. At the same time, the presence of the Chinese in worship is virtually prohibited.”³⁰

However, since 2019, China has adapted a more accepting framework towards the role of religions and teachings, as the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the ‘Program for the Implementation of the Construction of Civic Morality in the New Era’.³¹ Although Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are not explicitly named, the moral concepts of this program stem from their traditions: “Chinese traditional virtue is the essence of Chinese culture and an inexhaustible source of moral construction. We must treat Chinese outstanding traditional culture with respect and pride, fully explore the rich moral resources carried by cultural classics, historical relics, and cultural relics, and carry forward the praises of ancient sages, national heroes, and benevolent people, so that the genes of Chinese culture are better rooted in people’s ideology and moral concepts.”³² The Program aims to combat all moral challenges to society—from hedonism to bad customer service, and even ‘internet morality’.

This development means a shift from a Socialist ideology to a nationalist ideology—China no longer sees all religion as bad, but rather perceives ‘local’ religion as beneficial along the lines of a nationalist ideology. Chinese socialist ideals are widely perceived as outdated in Russian society (a ‘been there, done that’ approach), whereas

” The most controversial statement from the NATO perspective, however, is the call for “the formation of a more equitable and rational world order”. This statement, backed by Russia’s push for increasing military cooperation with China and Putin’s anti-NATO rhetoric may signify that Russia is taking the ability to counter NATO expansion seriously, and is hoping for China’s understanding.

increasingly more commonalities among Russian and Chinese nationalist approaches, including an emphasis on national religions, prevail. This may result in more leeway in ‘ideological cooperation’ with Russia, on moral issues, ‘extremism containment’ (anti-Islam agenda), and Internet control.

References to international actors

In general, Sino-Russian summits are characterised by mutual pledges to uphold the UN principles and expressions of faith in the UN system: “The parties advocate firmly defending the world order and the international system, which are based on the goals and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (UN)”.³³ The main challenge to this system, in the opinions of both Moscow and Beijing, is the unilateral policy of the United States. These opinions shine some light on the motivation

behind the strong rhetoric support for multilateralism—both for Moscow and Beijing, multilateralism is a euphemism for the competitiveness of their geopolitical agendas, of which the United States is the main obstructor.

We have identified two worrying narratives in Sino-Russian communications, the first being a call to reform the world order, and the second—ruthless criticism of the US. Whereas the first narrative is shared by both sides, the second is primarily important to the Russian side.

Reformation of the world order. The Joint Statement of the 2019 Summit includes 23 areas of Sino-Russian cooperation in the international arena, such as ‘protecting global peace and stability’ by safeguarding the central role of the UN, and ‘promoting the democratisation of international relations’ (i.e. a bigger role for Russia and China on



divisive issues). The most controversial statement from the NATO perspective, however, is the call for “the formation of a more equitable and rational world order”.³⁴ The Joint Statement of the 2018 Summit contained similar wording: “The parties [...] ensuring equal and indivisible security, mutual respect and taking into account the interests of each other, the rejection of confrontation and conflicts, contribute to the formation of a more just and rational polycentric world order.”³⁵ This statement, backed by Russia’s push for increasing military cooperation with China (see section 2.2 of this report) and Putin’s anti-NATO rhetoric during the meeting on state defence procurement³⁶ may signify that Russia is taking the ability to counter NATO expansion seriously, and is hoping for China’s understanding.

On the other hand, it could also mean that Russia is ramping up the rhetoric to bolster its anti-NATO image and to mask the reality of insufficient capacity—falling back on Putin’s being “extremely good at playing a very weak hand”.³⁷ (For more on the different approaches to NATO see Section 4.2 of this report.)

Anti-US rhetoric. As mentioned in Section 1 of this report, both sides use the Summits to underscore the positive impact of the Sino-Russian partnership globally. The main message, however, is an increase in global stability via a decrease in the global dominance of the US, in other words, ‘the fight for multipolarity’.

To demonstrate the high importance of global issues on the bilateral agenda, both presidents issued the Joint Statement on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability in the Modern Age, which centers around criticism of the United States: “The Parties recognize that international security is currently facing serious challenges, in connection with which the Parties intend to deepen mutual trust and strengthen interaction in the strategic sphere, and to persistently defend global and regional strategic stability. [...] The actions of the United States, in particular plans for the development of strategic missile defence systems and their deployment in various regions of the world and outer space, continue to have an extremely negative impact on the international and regional strategic balance, security and stability.”³⁸

It is unlikely that such strong language would lead to real joint action. China is careful not to antagonise the US where it counts. The statement of Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the 2020 Munich Conference demonstrates this: “China will further strengthen strategic coordination with Russia. China will work with the US to find a way of promoting peaceful co-existence and mutually beneficial cooperation.”³⁹ Still, China’s rhetorical support helps Russia convince its domestic audience that the US is the ‘common enemy’ of both Russia and China, and helps maintain a high level of anti-American sentiment. Such sentiment can be useful in times of confrontation and distracts the public from domestic issues.





Screenshot from RIA.ru: “A bear and a dragon. What will happen to NATO if Russian and Chinese army join their forces.”

Domestic messaging

In telling the story of the Sino-Russian Summits to the domestic audiences of the respective countries, two major differences emerge—the name of the partnership between the countries and their approaches to NATO.

Russia and China symbolically upgraded their relationship in 2019. Interestingly, the official title of the pre-upgrade Sino-Russian partnership does not sound the same in Chinese and Russian. In Chinese official documents, the status of relationship was referred to as a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” [全面战略协作伙伴关系],⁴⁰ whereas in Russian official documents and news outlets the partner-

ship was referred to as a “comprehensive equal partnership based in trust and strategic interaction” [всеобъемлющее равноправное доверительное партнерство и стратегическое взаимодействие].⁴¹

This difference can be explained by Russia’s sensitivity to Chinese dominance in the relationship. Russia is aware of suspicions among the Russian people of an ‘unequal partnership’ and of the perception that China is after Russian resources and land. The emphasis on ‘equality’ and ‘trust’ in Russian official communications is an attempt to counter negative domestic perceptions of China and criticism of increasingly close ties with China by promoting positive messages.

By agreeing to the addition of the strongly Chinese phrase ‘for a New Era’ to the new official name—Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era—Russia risks aggravating the growing domestic perception that it is catering to the Chinese agenda. Therefore, we expect Russia to distort the wording for domestic audiences even more, emphasising ‘equality’. Russia may also portray itself as the dominant partner in ‘vital’ areas such as security cooperation and deep space exploration. Possibly, Russia will push for the inclusion of the word “equal” (равноправное) in the partnership description in Chinese in the future.

Domestically, some differences emerge regarding the approach to NATO. The Russian domestic political narrative regarding



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NATO is exclusively and overwhelmingly negative. NATO is represented as the most direct threat to Russian sovereignty and to its interests in the surrounding regions. Common conspiracy theories circulating in Russia regard the West in general and NATO in particular as being behind Russia’s economic stagnation⁴² (the ‘they don’t want a strong Russia’ narrative). The narrative of ‘the bear and the dragon uniting’ as a challenge to NATO is a topic exercised in Russian media. In an article with over 30 000 reads, a Russian think-tanker states: “The Americans and their European allies are putting pressure on Russia and China. The US needs to be contained. Why do it alone, if [we] can unite [with China]?”⁴³

In China, however, a much less emotional approach to NATO prevails. The main recipient of Chinese media criticism is the current US administration, not NATO in general. It can be deduced that China is not prioritising the dissemination of an anti-NATO narrative domestically and is careful not to create the perception of Sino-Russian military cooperation as a challenge to NATO.

Differences between domestic messaging and international narratives

Although the narratives of the two countries meant for domestic consumption and those aimed at an international audience are generally consistent across platforms, in the more sensitive aspects of cooperation, differences between Russian and Chinese narratives can be identified.

Security is one of these. Both internally and externally, the Chinese official media demonstrate a more cautious approach, downplaying the importance of the Sino-Russian security partnership, whereas Russian media tend to emphasise the depth of the partnership for both domestic and external audiences. Possibly, such differences in outside signalling account for China’s reluctance to be considered Russia’s security partner, as this could contribute to the perception of China-as-threat internationally.



CONCLUSIONS

Narrative analysis demonstrates efforts on the part of both China and Russia to portray closer ties between them, at least discursively, in 2019 in comparison with 2018.⁴⁴ This can be explained as a response to the global situation, namely, US-China tensions and growing perception internationally that Russia is a disruptive actor; but also as a natural development preconditioned by the celebrations of 70 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the PRC and the USSR. In this context, upgrading their relationship by entering into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era is a symbolic gesture, not directly related to external factors, that also coincides with Chinese diplomatic symbolism elsewhere.

It is hard to predict, however, if this trend will continue. Russia experts believe that the peak of the relationship has already passed, because China poses a certain threat to Russia. First, the relationship is unbalanced, and not in Russia's favour. Second, China will use its newfound assertiveness not just on its adversaries, but also on its partners, including Russia: "The development of legitimate pride into arrogance, a neglect of the experience of other countries, attempts to dictate to them how to build their lives can be seen as a return to the xenophobic traditions of the Chinese empire, which ultimately led to its collapse."⁴⁵

Both sides have identified the lack of trust and the emotional distance between the countries to be a serious obstacle in deepening economic, local cross-border, and people-to-people ties. Russians tend to see China as a predatory and low-value-added economic partner, interested solely in its natural resources and land.⁴⁶ The Chinese public tends to view Russia as insignificant, disrespectful towards the sovereignty of

other countries, and declining in influence,⁴⁷ therefore, not suitable as a main global partner.

To counter such perceptions, both partners are consciously shaping their domestic narratives to emphasise emotional kinship and historic bonds through official channels and state-controlled media. Such narratives are devised and distributed in the periods surrounding major meetings, especially the 2019 Summit, and can be summed up as follows:

- **For domestic audiences in Russia: China is a high value-added partner, mutual complementarity exists between Chinese technological development and Russian exceptional human capital and tradition.** Space exploration as an area of cooperation is not emphasised by chance, as it is a particularly emotional and national pride-invoking sector in Russia. The Russian





Screenshot from People's Daily Online. "People of both countries have full confidence in Sino-Russian relations", People's Daily Online. The poster says: "China and Russia fight the pandemic together, difficult times reveal real friendship"

public feels that Russia should be in control in this aspect of cooperation, with China as the junior partner, and therefore not a threat to Russia.

- For domestic audiences in China: Russia is a close neighbour, which is treating China with growing respect and admiration; it supports their political system and culture, and is beneficial for growth.** The emotional aspect of the Chinese public wanting to be admired and respected, stemming from the 'Century of Humiliation', is exploited in this case. Using key phrases taken from Xi Jinping's official political communications, such

as 'community of shared destiny', stories about Russia are specially disseminated through the Chinese media to demonstrate that Russia has respect for the 'Chinese way' and is no longer the ideological provider as it was after World War II up until the Sino-Soviet split.

The narrative of the 'US government turning its back on multilateralism'⁴⁸ is ever-present in statements and publications on Sino-Russian cooperation on both sides, in outlets for domestic and external consumption alike, demonstrating the awareness of both governments that opposition to the US is a significant and common interest. The Russian side, however, is weary of the unstable nature of such a basis for cooperation,⁴⁹ and the general improbability of 'decoupling' US from China, and is using the momentum by trying to present a more 'positive' agenda, searching for examples of cooperation that would not be affected by the Sino-US dynamic, such as aerospace, pharma, and cooperation between municipalities.

The narrative of 'the bear and the dragon uniting to contain NATO' exists in the Russian media space, but not in the Chinese one. Today, Russia is more interested in closer security cooperation with China than vice-versa. NATO is higher on the Russian agenda than on the Chinese agenda, which prefers to attribute its grievances more narrowly—directing them towards the current US administration and



not towards NATO as a whole. However, given the growing acknowledgement of the rise of China as a challenge for NATO, this situation may change in the future, with China moving towards stronger anti-NATO rhetoric.

Russia and China chose specific themes to address at their Summits regarding ongoing international events and situations, such as the US withdrawal from international treaties and organisations, to argue jointly for a bigger global role for themselves.

Textual evidence did not suggest that the Sino-Russian Summits were used to put pressure on NATO or the EU at a given time. This could be explained by differences between the Chinese and Russian agendas.

China is much more careful in its statements – it expresses the importance of the Sino-Russian relationship while not fully siding with Russia's agenda. For its part, Russia has remained more assertive in its statements regarding the unfavourable nature of the existing global order and the influence of NATO.



Endnotes

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- 17 'В МИД Китая рассказали о дружбе Путина и Си Цзиньпина', *RT на русском*, 19 September 2019.
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